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AUTHOR Seeley, David S.
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ABSTRACT

Urban education is beginning to adopt a new focus, based on the ideas that all children can and must become competent in reading, writing, and mathematics, and that this objective can only be achieved by shifting from a "service delivery" approach to one based on the collaboration of students, parents, teachers, and the community. There still exist, however, a number of reservations and misunderstandings about the goal of competence for all. These include the arguments that (1) minimum skills will become learning maximums; (2) faster learners will be held back; (3) other subjects will be sacrificed; (4) it is unfair or culturally oppressive to expect poor and minority children to master basics; (5) education is a secondary problem to unemployment; and (6) the testing of competencies is problematical. These arguments amount to unconscious resistance to the acceptance of clear learning goals. For a community to move toward teaching students basic competencies, it must: (1) adopt and accept clear goals; (2) apply competency standards to all students; (3) assure that every school has an effective strategy for pursuing the goals and that teachers are receiving the help they need; and (4) mobilize community support and monitor budget priorities and school performance. (Author/GC)

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Competence For All Through Collaboration Of All

by
David S. Seeley
Director
The Public Education Association

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COMPETENCE FOR ALL THROUGH COLLABORATION OF ALL

A new focus for urban education is taking shape. At its core are two simple but powerful ideas:

(1) *All* children can and must become competent in reading, writing and mathematics; and

(2) This objective can be achieved only by shifting from a "service delivery" approach to one based on the collaboration of students, parents, teachers and the community.

These two ideas can be summarized as "competence for all through collaboration of all." They do not solve all educational problems, but they provide a way to attack the syndrome of failure, defeatism and confrontation which characterizes urban education today. The first provides a clear goal to work for; the second provides a way to work for it. Simple and obvious as they may appear, they represent a fundamental change from the present unsuccessful approaches.

The Goal of Competence for All

Until now the goals of education have been defined in vague terms which distract from the necessary prerequisite to their achievement. Without the ability to read, write and solve simple mathematical problems, children

cannot be "educated to their fullest potential" or be provided with "equal educational opportunity." On the other hand, if these basic competencies are achieved -- and they can be -- then the level of learning for nearly everyone can be greatly extended beyond these "minimums."

It is obvious that the time to achieve the fundamental skills is in the elementary school years, not in high school or college. An even sharper and more concrete goal therefore takes shape: Make sure every elementary school is successful with *all* its students with regard to basic competencies.

Educators confirm that this goal is achievable. Professor Benjamin Bloom's assertion that virtually every child can learn what schools are supposed to teach - and his mastery learning approach - signal that the job can be done.[1] Dr. William Glasser's Schools Without Failure testifies that we do not have to live with failure in our schools.[2] The recent English study, Fifteen Thousand Hours, reports that schools can do a good job regardless of the social background of the children.[3] An earlier report by the Council for Basic Education, on successful ghetto schools in New York City and elsewhere, reached the same conclusion.[4]

Official school policies are beginning to reflect this new attitude. The New York State Board of Regents has made clear that the object of its minimum competency tests is not to

screen out those who fail, but to ensure that *all* become competent. Chancellor Macchiarola has placed Ronald Edmonds, who advocates the same thesis, in charge of instruction in the New York City schools.

The decision to end "social promotions" in New York City and elsewhere, leads to the same imperative. Children can no longer be promoted regardless of whether they learn; on the other hand, sixteen year olds cannot be kept in first grade. There is only one solution: Make sure that everyone learns so that they can move forward. Competency for all is surely, and not just rhetorically, an idea whose time has come.

The Idea of Collaboration

Clear and desirable as the goal of competence for all may be, there is a major block to its being accepted as the basis for policy and action: Many people believe it cannot be achieved. This negative assumption itself has become a barrier to achieving a result so dependent on the morale and motivation of the pupil-teacher-parent community.

There is a fear that a clear goal of competence for all promises more than the schools can deliver, and that schools therefore will be unfairly held accountable. The fear is understandable, but the defeatism is unnecessary. It grows out of the widespread misconception that education is a kind of "service delivery" system in which a product (education) is "delivered" by schools, which need only be held

"accountable" in order to ensure learning.

There is nothing wrong with holding schools and school personnel accountable for doing their jobs; accountability is urgently needed. But their job is not to "deliver" education. Their job is to facilitate learning. The key is the word "facilitate." The learner must do the learning, with appropriate assistance. Education, therefore, necessarily involves a partnership between learner, teacher, parents and community in achieving goals that all understand and agree upon.

When we shift from a service delivery to a cooperative approach to education, many resources for learning become available that are now neglected, and a goal which is otherwise beyond reach becomes achievable. The most important resource is the student himself, who is the prime worker in the learning enterprise. Other resources include fellow students, parents, volunteers, and community resources of all kinds.

In the service delivery model, "resources" are perceived almost entirely in terms of dollars in the budget and the personnel and equipment they can provide. The dollars, as we have learned, are never enough. They never will be enough as long as citizens think they have fulfilled their responsibilities when they have paid their taxes, and need only sit back and wait for education to fall into their laps -- and perhaps complain if they are not satisfied.

with what they get. We have consumed billions of dollars in increased educational expenditures in the last twenty years in that vain expectation. We will consume billions more with no visible results until we shift to a different approach -- based on mutual responsibility, cooperation and partnership -- in the classroom, school, and community.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT COMPETENCE

Change is always hard -- especially changes in attitude. People develop psychological as well as financial interests in the status quo. Defense against change often takes the form of objections and misunderstandings which block new thinking. Here are some of the common misunderstandings about the goal of competence of all:

Minimums and Maximums

Some say if energies are focused on achieving minimum learning standards, the minimums will become maximums. There is no experience to justify this assumption, and history suggests opposite is true. Acquisition of literacy and math skills is a prerequisite and also an enticement to acquisition of other "basics," such as history, science, literature, and the arts. Throughout history, society's educational level has progressed as the proportion of its population who are literate increased and, in turn, expanded the proportion of intellectual, managerial, artistic and other well-educated citizens. Minimum standards provide a necessary floor, not a ceiling.

Fast and Slow Learners

A related misunderstanding is that efforts to ensure that all students gain basic skills will hold back the faster learners. As

Benjamin Bloom has pointed out, however, once it is clear that the goal is to ensure that all children in a class master certain material, and steps are taken to assure that all keep up, everyone can move ahead faster. Able students suffer more in their educational advancement where there is a lack of strategies for ensuring that all students learn, since this leaves many more "failures" and unmotivated students to consume teachers' energies and interfere with learning.

The Basics and "Real Learning"

Next we come to the misconception that emphasis on the "basics" will lead to so much drill and boring instruction that children will not learn how to think and solve problems. It was presumably on the basis of this misconception that the prestigious National Assessment of Educational Progress suggested the "back to basics" movement was responsible for the decline in math scores, because it deprived children of the ability to solve problems. The ability to solve problems, however, is exactly what competence in math is all about.

The same thing is true with regard to reading. The public wants people to be able to read, but apparently some educators translate this into such mind-numbing drills on the alphabet and meaningless "reading" exercises that children actually learn *not* to read -- or even to hate reading. The basics do not *prevent*

"real learning"; they *are* real learning.

The 3 R's and Other Subjects

Yet another argument is that insisting on competence in the 3 R's will foreclose teaching art, music, citizenship and other important subjects. This sounds like a real danger until we notice that schools which do a good job with reading, writing, and arithmetic almost always do better in these other areas, while schools which fail to teach students the 3 R's almost invariably do a poor job with other subjects as well. As for citizenship, students who fail to develop basic competencies are far more likely to become "disruptive" students. By the time they reach high school as confirmed "incompetents," they are the prime candidates for the dropout and delinquency cycle. Subjects other than the 3 R's are indeed important, but it is a foolish educator who thinks he is sacrificing these when he lays a firm foundation for learning, or who does not realize a rich curriculum is the best way to develop competency in the 3 R's. Art is not the enemy of reading or math, nor are the 3 R's the enemy of art.

Competency and Equal Treatment

A rather perverse confusion is the idea that expecting basic competencies of all children is "unfair" to poor and minority children who have less opportunity to gain them. Much sympathy is expressed, almost always by people

whose children are succeeding, that such demands should not be made on "less fortunate" students. But parents of "less fortunate" students seldom share this view. They see it as a severe deprivation of equal treatment when their children are not taught the most basic tools of learning. And of course they are right. Poor children may labor under great hardships, but failure to learn how to read, write, and solve mathematical problems only increases their handicaps.

Competency and Cultural Oppression

A second cousin of the "take pity on the poor" attitude is the notion that making sure that everyone learns basic skills is a form of "cultural oppression," of "middle class" and "Anglo" values. There are real problems of cultural oppression when the values of poor and minority children are put down, but one of the worst put downs is to assume they are unable or unsuited to gain the basic tools of discourse and an understanding of the society of which they are a part.

There are also important issues regarding bilingual and bicultural education, but we should not let them confuse us about the clear imperative to make sure that all students become competent readers and writers of English. Nor should legitimate concerns about the rationalistic biases of our current curriculum (to the detriment of aesthetics and other "non-geometric" modes of thought) distract us from the

clear need for students to learn how to think mathematically.

Education and Unemployment

A related misunderstanding is that unemployment is the real problem in the motivation of youngsters, and there is no use worrying about educational failure so long as so many people can't get jobs even if they are educated. While employment issues are real to high school youngsters, they are no barrier to elementary school students learning basic skills. At this age children are eager to gain competence for its own sake and not because it leads to employment.

It is bad enough that people are economically dependent without making them intellectually dependent as well by depriving them of the tools to think and speak for themselves. Literacy empowers people whether they are employed or unemployed.

Competency and Testing

More complex but ultimately no more relevant are the arguments based on claims that tests are invalid or abused. Many educational tests are invalid for some or all purposes, and have been horribly misused -- for deprecating and mislabeling people, excluding them from desirable opportunities, for sorting and grading them for irrelevant purposes, segregating them by race and class. But the point of the competency movement is not testing, sorting, or

segregating; it is to assure competence. The tests are used only to determine whether the goal has been achieved or whether more must be done. Tests developed and used for this purpose are generally valid; students who cannot pass basic skills competency tests almost always have real problems with basic skills.

Some educators nevertheless claim that competency requirements should not be adopted because competency tests have not been "validated." This is an ironically misplaced use of a quite correct objection to some tests as the basis for employment. In such cases, the fact that the test has not been "validated" indicates lack of evidence that test scores correlate with job performance. Competency tests, however, are not used as indicators of other qualifications than those being tested; they are a direct assessment of whether a student can read, write and solve simple problems of the precise kind on the tests. There is no need for them to be "validated" in the same sense that is required when a test is trying to assess *indirectly* whether a person can perform a certain job.

In short, all these objections and misunderstandings amount to unconscious resistance to acceptance of clear learning goals. The arguments sometimes include valid educational concerns, but on examination they turn out to be a form of quibbling to distract attention from the fact that competence in reading, writing and math is a necessity both for individuals and for the society. The quibbling won't work;

it will only make people more irritated with those who engage in it. It is no longer possible to avoid acknowledging that everyone must attain these basic competencies. The tests are testing survival skills; how can we do less than help young people gain what they need to survive?

A PROGRAM FOR COMPETENCY THROUGH COLLABORATION

How does a community which has been accepting failure in its schools move to a situation in which all students gain basic competencies? Here are some of the steps:

1. Make Sure There Are Clear Learning Goals

Universal agreement on all educational goals is impossible. This must not prevent, however, the clear and unambiguous definition of what is wide agreement and where achievement can be measured, such as reading, writing and math. The more specific the goals and the measurement in these areas, the greater likelihood of success. Community awareness, understanding and acceptance of these goals must be widespread so they can be widely supported.

2. Make Sure Competencey Standards Apply To *ALL* Students

The secret power of competency standards comes from their application to *all* students (except the small percentage of children with severe handicaps that genuinely prevent meeting them). When the ethos of a school or school system involves a "winners and losers" game, some students are set to competing to make sure they are not the losers, while others reconcile themselves to the role of "incompetents" and become the malcontents of the school, and later of society. When the goal

shifts to competence for *all*, the aim is to have *no more losers*; everyone is expected to become competent. Around this goal the dynamics of a classroom, school, school system and community shifts fundamentally, and all can cooperate to achieve it. Human resources that previously were passive, uninvolved or counterproductive can become focused in a shared effort. With this source of cohesion and unity as a base, there is still plenty of room for competition, if desired, as to who will be the *best* speller, runner, drummer, or poet. But winners and losers is no longer the name of the game for basic competencies.

For those children who have been competently diagnosed as having such severe handicaps that they cannot meet these goals, there must be a written individual educational plan agreed to by the parents, which explains the disability and the course of instruction and/or treatment to insure as much learning as possible.

3. Make Sure That Those In Charge Of The Schools Share These Goals

At the height of the controversy in New York City over requiring students to pass a basic competency test in reading and math at about the sixth grade level, three principals in the public school system were quoted in the press as saying that:

"To educate everybody is an impossible goal.

Some will never learn how to read and write no matter what you do."

"...the popular belief that all children can learn and achieve certain academic abilities ...is a fallacy."

"Students who are unable to achieve academically...can be developed in other ways - creatively, musically, humanely - without subjecting them to the 'humiliation' of constant failure."

To achieve competency for all, it is imperative that such principals be: (a) found to have been misquoted, (b) willing to change their minds, or (c) removed. It makes no more sense to leave such principals in charge of schools than to keep a fire chief who says he does not believe in putting out fires. The question is not one of competency or performance, it is one of suitability for a job which one does not intend to carry out. A principal can make or break a school. Too many schools have been broken by principals who do not share the goal of ensuring successful learning for all students in their charge. It is also essential, of course, for every principal to have the *ability* to lead his/her school to success in achieving the goal.

4. Make Sure Every School Has A Strategy For Achieving The Goals

Agreement on goals is not enough. There must be a clearly understood and accepted *plan* for achie-

ing them. It is the job of the system to help define and support the elements of comprehensive strategies for success. These include:

. A community campaign to convince everyone of the merits and achievability of the goal and their role in it;

. Training of all teachers and teacher candidates in a diversity of sound teaching methods;

. Involvement of entire school faculty in teaching basic skills in all subject classes;

. Determination of the learning goals of each learning situation, then making them the priority for both teachers and students and basing promotion on their achievement;

. A team approach within the staff, with the principal ultimately responsible for seeing that children's learning problems are addressed by all concerned teachers, parents, pupils;

. Involvement of students in developing a positive classroom and school atmosphere and helping each other learn (peer tutoring, group competition, etc);

. Use of volunteer tutors from the community;

. Helping develop parental responsibility and understanding of the role parents can play

in supporting their children's learning;

. Involving religious, cultural, business, and social welfare communities in helping to achieve the goal.

5. Make Sure That Every School Is Using Effective Learning Methods

Methods *do* make a difference. The keystones of a successful program are flexibility and persistence, i.e. keep trying various measures until you succeed. There are, however, some useful general methods:

In reading, tried and true techniques include reading aloud to students in the earliest grades, providing time for sustained silent reading, making sure that books are available for students to make their own choices, working individually with students having difficulties, identifying hearing, speech and vision problems, making sure that students maintain the belief that most come to school with -- that reading is fun, empowering, and useful for accomplishing their own goals.

In writing, make sure that students write! It makes little difference how much "instruction" students are given in writing unless they are provided with plenty of opportunity to express themselves in writing. If teachers do not have time to correct a reasonable amount of written student work, here again is an area where volunteers can help -- either other students in the school, high school or college students, adults

from the community, or senior citizens. Patients in nursing homes or hospitals might welcome communications from students. If students don't write, they won't learn to write, no matter how much instruction. If their work is not responded to, they will not learn to write well.

In math, make sure the teachers are not afraid of math! If they are, don't let them touch it! Fear of math is contagious. To a large extent competence in math at elementary levels is a matter of students gaining confidence in their ability to use their own reasoning powers. Some students acquire this confidence right away and are off and running, but if there is trouble, make sure the student gets individual attention early to assure mastery and confidence from the beginning. Volunteer tutors, either peer or adult, are again immensely valuable for this. Much of the attention needed need not be professional, so long as it is individual, i.e. sticking with the student and helping him reason through problems by himself until he develops the confidence that he can *use his own brain* to solve math problems. Provide plenty of visual and tactile material so students can grasp math relationships in a variety of ways. Make sure students memorize and become thoroughly familiar with basic number relations, so they can add, substract and multiply with complete assurance.

A number of school systems use one form or another of "mastery learning" which can be very effective so long as it avoids the danger of over-mechanization and concentrates on its real strengths, which are: clear learning goals, constant feedback to teachers, students and parents as to achievement of those goals, assurance of mastery before moving on, and persistent, "success oriented" measures *with every child* whenever mastery is blocked.

Computer-assisted instruction is also being used in some schools. There has been a widespread "rejection reaction" against electronic "panaceas" in our educational systems. People have quite correctly concluded that "machines cannot replace people." But, machines can *help* people, and there is great potential in computers to assist in the learning process. A well programmed computer has some of the same facility to engage children in the learning process as an individual tutor or good teacher. Computers can help teachers turn passive school attenders into active learners, and that is what education is all about.

6. Make Sure Teachers Get The Help They Need

Teaching is a lonely job. Despite all the administrative positions that have been added in American public schools, teachers constantly complain that they cannot get the help they need. The payoff of instruction is in the classroom, but teachers are individuals and one

child who does not learn may confound even the best of them. Other personnel can often assist a teacher to ascertain why instruction is not working and help to improve ineffective teacher-learner relationships. In a time of budget restraint, funds for such assistance will not come easily, but possibilities may develop as a result of new flexibility in use of Title I and other special funds, and the need to provide assistance to teachers in adjusting to the mainstreaming of handicapped children into regular classes. Redefining the role of existing administrative and counseling staff can also help.

7. Mobilize Community Support

The goal of competence for every child cannot be achieved by schools alone. It can only be achieved by support from parents, citizens, community resources, and ultimately the students themselves. School officials -- especially principals -- should reach out for such help. If they are shy about asking for it, they have to be helped to learn how. The important thing is the goal and its achievement. It can and must become a *community* enterprise. Volunteers are important not only for the direct assistance they can give students who need individual attention, but for their value in symbolizing the commitment of the community to the success of the school. Citizens must demonstrate their support in many other ways: by voting in school board elections, by choosing candidates who are committed to the successfuly education of *all* children, by appre-

ciating what schools do when they do a good job, and by promoting the importance of education whenever they can.

Parents, of course, have a special role, and must be encouraged, and helped if necessary, to support their children's school work, provide time and place for homework, curtail T.V. watching, read and talk to their children, etc. The fact that some parents are unable or unwilling to fulfill their responsibilities does not mean that their crucial role can be neglected.

8. Monitor Schools' Performance

The purpose of helping is to achieve certain specific learning objectives. The degree to which every school is meeting the learning objectives of competence for all students must be public information. If these learning objectives are not being achieved, action must be taken.

In some cases a community might generate a kind of "community chest thermometer" strategy for achieving competency for all, showing the progress toward this goal school by school. The monitoring can be done either by school system staff, or by responsible citizen and parent groups, or both. If citizen and parent groups are not involved in the school-by-school monitoring, they should most certainly oversee the monitoring, since school systems have ways of forgetting community goals if there is no effective community presence.

9. Watch Budget Priorities

Education costs money. How much money it will cost to ensure competence for all depends on the approach taken by a community. In one community a large part of the task may be done through extra school staff paid for in the school budget. In another, more might be done through self-help, volunteers, peer tutoring, contributions and a refocusing of the energies of current school staff. If competency goals are achieved with fewer dollars, more is available for other learning goals.

When funds are limited, it becomes more urgent to set priorities and combine budget dollars with non-budgetary resources to get the job done. Parents and citizens (i.e. consumers) must participate in budget and collective bargaining decisions to assure that there are sufficient funds and an appropriate mix of dollar and other resources. When they see cuts in essential service, they should not suffer silently; they have a responsibility to fight for priorities. This is one of the functions of groups like the Public Education Association and the Education Priorities Panel in New York City, which fought for and won the shift of $100 million in the Board of Education budget from non-instructional budget lines to functions directly serving children, and helped to add $20 million to the budget when this seemed necessary to assure needed services.

Money problems cannot excuse failure. Certainly in America, the richest society in the history of the world, we have to assume there are enough resources of one kind or another to assure at least survival skills for all members of the community.

CONCLUSION

In the end, a community gets the education it is willing to work and fight for. If a community wants to achieve competence for all -- and to put an end to massive failure in its schools -- it certainly can do so. This may be hard to believe when so many reforms have been tried and failed. But the billions that have been spent on "innovations" in the past twenty-five years all had to do with what "they" -- the schools -- could do to reduce school failure. The approach which is now coming into focus is fundamentally different: It has to do with what "we" -- parents, students, teachers, principals, and citizens -- can do, all working together, to end the failure.

This approach will require hard work and changed attitudes on the part of all involved. But once a community discovers the power of setting a clear goal and working collaboratively to achieve it -- once it casts off the paralyzing concept of education as "service delivery" -- it can gain the confidence to tackle other goals. When a community has achieved competence for all, nothing can stop it.

FOOTNOTES

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